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ABSTRACT

College interdisciplinary programs that focus on student writing are reviewed, and research and criticisms of these programs are briefly addressed. Features of 12 interdisciplinary programs emphasizing writing at the undergraduate level are summarized. The following are among the conclusions offered: (1) a growing number of higher education authorities have begun to recognize the potential value of an interdisciplinary approach to college composition; (2) the majority of college interdisciplinary programs have been instituted within the last decade; (3) English departments are consistently looked upon to furnish the leadership and effective writing models for interdisciplinary composition programs; (4) team teaching and planning efforts among professors from various departments are important; and (5) some of the major problems associated with instituting interdisciplinary programs have been primarily administrative and attitudinal. The 12 programs are offered at the following colleges: the Beaver College, Boston University, California State University at Dominquez Hills, Ithaca College, School of the Ozarks, Temple University, West Chester State College, Western Michigan University, University of California at Davis, University of California at Los Angeles, University of Michigan, and the University of Minnesota. (SW)

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College Composition Through An Interdisciplinary Approach

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Running Head: Interdisciplinary College Composition

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College Composition Through An Interdisciplinary Approach

> ...we might as well admit that good writing is as much a function of content as technique, and give the students something to say before fussing about how they say it: In doing so, we might also gain some self-respect as craftsmen, some integrity as artists, and some broader notions of practicality and utility.
>
> (Pichaske, 1976, p. 124)

When one ponders the term "interdisciplinary," a number of possible thoughts may come to mind. In recent years, the term has made its way into the literature of higher education representing a wide range of educational ideas, approaches, programs, and even degrees. To confuse the issue further, a number of other terms - "cross disciplinary" and "multi-disciplinary" to mention two - have also been used.

In an effort to clarify these terms, the following definition of "inter-disciplinary" seems most consistent within the literature: "... interdisciplinary programs attempt to integrate the contributions of several disciplines to a problem, issue, or theme from life." (Meeth, 1978, p.10). In the case of this research, the central theme under investigation will be college undergraduate writing in the context of interdisciplinary programs.

The idea of writing across the subject matter areas has been the theme of a growing number of authorities. Shaughnessy (1979, p. 225), for instance, has called for all branches and departments at the college level to work for the teaching of the basic writing student.

Another authority, Berthoff (1978, p. 5), went even further with this theme by indicating that writing across the curriculum was <u>not</u> a "fad"

but rather an assumption. In illustrating this theme, she gave the following ideas about the relationship of language use (including writing) to critical thinking in all fields:

1. Observation is central to all disciplines: learning to look and look again is learning to question.
2. Learning the special language of a field is a principal way of learning the concepts of that field.
3. The rhetorical concepts of invention and disposition are, as it were, cross-cultural.

(pp. 5-7)

This research project will concentrate on a review of some contemporary college interdisciplinary programs that focus on student writing. In addition to program reviews, some current research and criticisms of these programs will also be included. From an analysis of this material, a number of conclusions and recommendations will be drawn.

Review of Some Current Programs

This portion of the research will focus on a review of some salient features of a number of interdisciplinary programs emphasizing writing at the college/university levels. Their placement in this report is alphabetical and thus no preference for a particular program or component is intended. The real purpose of this section of the report is to give the reader an overview of some program features currently in progress at these institutions.

Beaver College

The cross-disciplinary writing program at Beaver College in Philadelphia was built on a number of steps that Maimon (1979, pp. 1-9) says can be instituted in other colleges. Throughout her paper, she emphasizes these steps: enlisting support of English faculty members, requesting other department colleagues to submit freshmen writing samples, encouraging other faculty members to look closely at the processes involved in the teaching of writing, and introducing various writing tasks throughout all departments (pp. 1-7). In addition, the English department can provide models of effective techniques for the composition program (p. 6).

Boston University

A cooperative approach to composition instruction was developed at Boston University's College of Basic Studies (Matlak, 1978, pp. 1-19). This approach emphasized the following components: joint planning by rhetoric and content instructors; devotion of class time by both instructors to identification of teacher and student expectations in such areas as social science, natural science, the humanities, and psychology; devotion of time in the rhetoric classes to developing writing skills for content assignments; and preparation of rough drafts for the rhetoric instructor and revised papers for the content instructor.

California State University (Dominquez Hills campus)

A major component of the California State University College program is the "Writing Adjunct" course (Sutton, 1976, pp. 1-9). In this program, the

student is assigned writings from a wide range of subject area courses. He can meet weekly with either a writing adjunct instructor or a peer tutor to discuss progress.

> The major objective of the Writing Adjunct program is to train the student to become his own editor. Throughout the term he may observe the actions of the instructors and tutors in the program; and later in the term he takes part in an editing workshop where he acts in the role of a peer tutor. (p. 6)

Ithaca College

The most salient feature of the Applied Writing Program at Ithaca College was a series of summer seminars offered to faculty members in various departments, (Lor , 1977, pp. 1-16). The syllabus for each seminar included:

- an introductory unit
- an unstructured discussion of student papers (which faculty participants had earlier submitted...)
- a getting-the-student-started unit
- a unit on the source paper (one that uses library research)
- a marking and commenting unit
- a round-up session
- a discussion evaluating the seminar (p. 4)

School of the Ozarks

A rather unique interdisciplinary approach was planned by the School of the Ozarks. This plan is briefly described below:

> Still another method our department at the School of the Ozarks plans to involve other departments in the teaching of writing and to maintain writing standards is to change our two-course Freshman English Program. We plan to keep our two-course program, but delay the second course until students are juniors. We believe this will

> help them because they will have greater maturity and will better recognize the need to write well. They will also be well into their individual disciplines and majors, and writing assignments will be such that they will be writing about their disciplines. Because the classes will be smaller (the theory being that most of the students who just can't hack college work will have dropped out before they are juniors), we will have more time to devote to the students and their problems, and more importantly, we will be able to coordinate the writing class with other classes in their major.
>
> (Pfister, 1978, p. 4)

Temple University

In Temple's Freshman Interdisciplinary Studies Program (F.I S.). the students (ranging from remedial to honors level) are invited to join from four to six faculty mambers for the academic year (Scheffler, 1980, pp. 51-57). These faculty members lead the students in an interdisciplinary group that will undertake a year-long study on a broad topic, such as "Law and Order" or "The Human Condition" or "The Environment." An integral part of the program is the college writing component.

> ...Since all Temple students must pass a composition course and, if need be, a remedial writing course also, provision is made to work these courses into the F.I.S. structure so that participating students will fulfill the requirements on schedule....The major advantage is that F.I.S. readings, lectures, and related discussions provide a context for purposeful writing in the coordinated composition classes.
>
> (p. 51)

West Chester State College

The major thrust of a program at West Chester State College has been a cross-disciplinary writing workshop held for the faculty (Weiss and Peich, 1980, pp. 33-41). During June, 1978, for example, a week-long workshop

was held for twenty-five members fo West Chester's faculty representing departments in the arts and sciences as well as applied fields such as education, nursing, and physical education. These professors taught a range of students - both graduate and undergraduate; some professors had written for publication and others had not. All faculty had in common a desire to improve their own student's writing although many focused their thinking on surface error correction - poor grammar, punctuation, and spelling (p. 33).

At the conclusion of this particular workshop, the participants rated it as being "very worthwhile" and attested to a number of key attidunial changes (p. 39). A far smaller number gave the traditional view of writing as a review of grammar rules; instead, a greater number absorbed such ideas as faculty sharing of ideas with students and using individual conferences to discuss student writing.

Western Michigan University

English 105 at Western Michigan University has several options, one of which is the course "Writing and Science," which is intended to help students become better communicators as they enter college (Brown, 1975, pp. 1-8). Students in this course are exposed to a large amount of linguistics and various kinds of writing other than the scientific, such as biography and speculative prose. Through the duration of the term, students are constantly made aware of how writing can be useful for a scientist.

University of California at Davis

The thrust of their program has been a pre-law writing course taught by a number of professors who do not have a legal background, (White and Brand, 1976, pp. 41-46). The emphasis in legal writing, as in various other composition phases, is on logical flow, organization, development, and clarity of style. Generally, most of their pre-law students do not have "grammar problems," the authors report (p. 42). Thus, major student writing needs beyond the surface error level tend to dictate the structure and content of these courses, (p. 45).

University of California at Los Angeles

A course "Writing as Problem Solving" has comprised the core of the U.C.L.A. program, (Moss, 1975, pp. 187-192). This course focuses

> ...on the idea that students will learn to use writing best if they are exploring topics that have value and significance to them. For this reason, a writing workshop was formally conjoined to specific courses on campus. The writing instructor did not assign topics as would teachers in most traditional composition courses; instead, he used the outlines, rough drafts, and final drafts of the companion course papers. He would visit these other classes, survey the required texts, and conduct his own workshop to communicate the principles of good writing. These principles were applied directly to the composition of the companion course papers. (p. 188))

University of Michigan

The creation of an English Composition Board (ECB) by a vote of the College of Literature, Science, and Arts to assume responsibility for the teaching of writing within the college was the initial thrust of the program at the University of Michigan (Fader, 1979, pp. 1-7). The ECB then

undertook the development of the following seven-part program:

> 1. Assessment. The Board assesses the writing of every student entering the College for the first time; guided by the results of that assessment, the ECB places each student at an appropriate level of writing instruction.
>
> 2. Tutorial. The Board teaches the special tutorial courses required of those students placed at the lowest level by their performance in the writing assessment. The ECB also determines the length of time that such students must remain in tutorial courses.
>
> 3. Introductory Composition. The Board places students into Introductory Composition, assists the English Department in defining the nature of the course as well as improving its quality, and assumes responsibility for relating introductory Composition to the College program.
>
> 4. Writing Workshop. The Board staffs and operates a Writing Workship open to every undergraduate in the College on a self- or faculty-referral basis. Workshop attendance may also be required of students whose performance on the writing assessment of in ECB tutorials indicates a need for such support.
>
> 5. Upperlevel Writing. The Board advises and helps each Collegiate department and program in creation of a course or curriculum for its concentrators designed to fulfill the Upperlevel Writing portion of the requirement...
>
> 6. Research. The Board is responsible for reporting to the faculty at suitable intervals during the initial five years of its existence upon the quality of the new program...
>
> 7. Outreach. In the process of considering and affirming the new writing requirement, LS&A faculty asked the ECB to attempt to improve writing instruction in Michigan high schools and community colleges, which supply between 75 and 80% of the College's enrollment...
>
> (p. 2)

In writing about this particular program, one certain professor at the University of Michigan sees student "mix" in these classes as beneficial (Sawyer, 1978, pp. 1-8). Sawyer feels that isolating students is not desirable, since it will not prepare them to explain their work to the public at large. This approach forces students to examine their own fields and write

about them for a certain audience - the uninformed reader - not just the people directly involved in their majors.

University of Minnesota

The use of a research report course forms a major part of the program at both the University of Minnesota at Duluth and the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay (Larmouth, 1972, pp. 383-389). Student paper topics grew out of real concerns, and the execution of the plan involved close cooperation of faculty in other departments.

Within this program, a number of papers were written and reviewed by various professors. The following list of topics illustrate the kinds of work being done by students, and how this material was actually used outside of the classroom:

> . a paper on renovating the ambulance service in a nearby town was presented to the town council
> . a paper on teen-age unemployment was referred to the area high school counselors and to the Office of Economic Opportunity
> . a paper on tertiary sewage treatment facilities was read at an ecology club meeting
> . a paper on dormitory facilities and temporary student housing went to the housing office
> . a paper opposing consolidation of an independent school district went to a local board of education and to their attorneys
>
> (p. 389)

Research on the Interdisciplinary Approach

While a growing number of authorities agree on the usefulness of the interdisciplinary approach to college writing, statistical research data relating to the effectiveness of this approach is limited. This section

of the report will briefly review a small sampling of such studies to illustrate the types of experimental research that can be generated in this area.

In a comparison of two approaches to freshman composition at Western Washington State College, Budd (1969, pp. 209-221) hypothesized that expository writing can be taught as effectively in conjunction with humanities as it can be taught separately in courses of English composition. After subjecting his data to an analysis of variance (F-ratio), he concluded, although tentatively, that his hypothesis was true. (The conclusion was tentative because of such matters as test writing topics and a heavier attrition of students in the humanities group.)

In another research project at Platte Technical Community College (Hutkin, 1975, pp. 1-68), a total of four groups of students (two experimental and two control) were used to compare cognitive and affective written communication development in the context of the world of work (experimental) compared with the same objectives, placed in a liberal arts context, (control). A "post-test only control group design" was used to determine cognitive and affective differences. An analysis of the data revealed that the overall experimental approach proved better in cognitive skill development whereas the control approach proved somewhat better in affective development.

In an interesting piece of research ocncerning textbook writing assignments, (Donlan, 1976, pp. 1-14), three content area teachers in mathematics, science, and social studies were surveyed at the University of California. The survey was concerned with those professors who assign writing to their

students and the percentage of textbooks in those areas which include writing assignments. Some of the findings included: Mathematics and science teachers favor reporting over exposition, whereas social studies teachers are about equally divided on the issue. The greater porportion (45%) of surveyed science textbooks assigned writing while only 5% of mathematics textbooks did so and 19% for social studies (p. 4). Some implications drawn from this data were that the emerging role of an English teacher as a writing consultant was seen as one who assists fellow teachers in other content fields in assigning, teaching, and evaluating writing, (pp. 9-10).

Criticisms and Problems

While a great number of the "authorities" (many of whom have been previously cited) have praised the interdisciplinary approach, it has also received some criticism. This section will briefly review some of these criticisms and will mention a few of the "problems" associated with this approach.

One major area of criticism is that expressed by teachers from other disciplines and their views on where the responsibility for writing actually falls. Dorenkamp (1978, pp. 1-13), lists the following types of criticisms that teachers will make:

> 1. That's the English Department's job. Writing is a skill; you take care of the writing, and I'll take care of the content.
>
> 2. Grammar is the main problem. I even mark all the grammatical errors, so I've done my job, but the writing still doesn't improve. If they can't do the work, they shouldn't be here.
>
> 3. I've got a syllabus to cover, and that approach will take too much time away from it. (Tyranny of the syllabus fallacy.)

4. You don't have to write yourself to recognize good writing when you see it.

5. This is the way I learned to write, and it worked for me.

6. I've been giving these assignments for years, and students used to be able to do them.

7. Whaddya mean Blank's unreadable? He's published more than you have.

8. We're already doing all that.

(p. 10)

In an interdisciplinary program at the University of Oregon (Teich, 1977, pp. 105), student performance and interest were noted to be high when their writing assignments were related to the subject matter in other disciplines. In a number of situations, however, this program encountered problems in the areas of enrollment, scheduling, and staffing (p. 2). The author did note that these problems were encountered at a relatively large university and that they might not hold true at a small college.

A possible slight of basic skills, a lack of review of interdisciplinary courses by professors from various disciplines, and the hesitation of some respected "senior scholars" in recognizing interdisciplinary programs are some of the reservations and criticisms given by Baum (1975, pp. 30-33). Her sentiments are best expressed by her aversion to the very word "interdisciplinary."

"INTERDISCIPLINARY." There's no such word. It's an illegitimate hybrid, an example of educator's jargon-number eight in column one on the "Instant Jargon Generator," the London Times Guide to Gobbledygook, reprinted in the October 1973 CUNY Courier. "Interdisciplinary" is a polysyllabic, Latinate concoction, speciously suggestive of substantial things.

(p. 30)

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Based upon a review of the literature and an analysis of this information, the following conclusions seem warranted:

1. A growing number of authorities in higher education have begun to recognize the potential value of an interdisciplinary approach to college composition.

2. The majority of college interdisciplinary programs are recent innovations, being instituted within the last decade.

3. English departments are consistently looked upon to furnish the leadership and effective writing models for interdisciplinary composition programs.

4. Team teaching and planning efforts among professors from various departments seem to be necessary ingredients for success with interdisciplinary programs.

5. The statistical research supporting interdisciplinary approaches is limited; more studies need to be conducted, particularly experimental.

6. Some of the major problems associated with instituting interdisciplinary programs have been primarily administrative (staffing, scheduling, etc.) and attitudinal (on the part of faculty members.)

7. Many programs, apparently achieving some measure of success, have made generous use of workshops and seminars for faculty to change attitudes and train for leadership within these programs.

8. While a number of programs were reviewed, it is the opinion of this researcher that the program of the University of Michigan could serve as a prototype for others as it seems to contain the vital components as follows: assessment, tutorial, introductory composition, writing workshop, upperlevel writing, research, and outreach.

Recommendations

In addition to the conclusions cited above, the researcher has offered the following recommendations concerning the interdisciplinary movement:

1. More research is needed and recommended in order to validate certain types of programs or program components as to effectiveness.

2. More reports about interdisciplinary programs are needed, along with information dissemination concerning program components, costs, structures, effectiveness, etc.

3. More effective presentations to college-level administrators concerning interdisciplinary potential would be desirable.

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